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AUTHOR Rice, Leonard W.
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ABSTRACT

This speech outlines some criticisms of the voluntary accreditation associations as they now exist, responds to some of the criticisms, and sets forth ways in which the associations are improving their programs. Cited criticisms come from the community, professors, faculty associations, and from minority groups. The author notes that much of the criticism is invalid and begs the question. On the other hand, accreditation associations are responding positively to valid criticism by attempting to correct deficiencies. (JF)

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THE ROLE OF REGIONAL ACCREDITING ASSOCIATIONS IN INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

(A speech given by Leonard W. Rice, chairman of the Commission on Higher Schools, at the annual meeting of the Northwest Association of Secondary and Higher Schools, December 7, 1971)

Institution-wide accreditation is solidly established as a means of certifying that the programs of a college or university are soundly conceived and competently carried out. Federal and state government, students and their parents, faculty, and anybody else interested depend upon the six regional accrediting associations in the United States for the assurance of educational accountability which accreditation certifies. The standards and procedures of the Northwest Association, like those of other such associations, have been developed, tested, and refined for many years. These procedures and standards are remarkable for their adaptability to a wide range of institutions. They permit considerable institutional diversity and flexibility and in addition are correctable and alterable to meet changing educational needs.

Consequently it may appear to our membership that institution-wide, voluntary accreditation is completely secure. An agency as tested and proved as this one is not insecure, but our kind of accreditation and our procedures are being questioned, and we need to pay attention to what critics are saying. Some of these critics may be poorly informed and some may even be illy motivated, but we need to be open and teachable and make a creative response when criticism is justified.

Let me state what some of the critics are saying. The nature of our organization raises some questions because it is an association created and operated by educational institutions. No one directly representing the public and unattached to an educational institution has an official function in this organization. It is asserted, therefore, that we do not sufficiently represent the public interest and that, consequently, public needs are not met as they should be through accreditation. We are charged with being self-protecting societies with no accountability to the public. Institutions need to change; accreditation, it is said, inhibits change. Greater institutional diversity is needed; it is charged that accreditation of the kind we do homogenizes institutions, blending them into a sterile sameness through one set of standards and by punishing the unorthodox.

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Charges go on as follows. Costs are increased because things not necessary are insisted upon by the accrediting agency. The worst features of institutions are covered over by accreditation. Research is stressed rather than teaching. Career education suffers. Accreditation standards lack validity, being untested by scientific evidence. Emphasis is on the process of education, not the product. Sometimes there emerges a picture of a monolithic educational establishment standing in the way of progress and supported and defended by accreditation. (The one thing which education is not is monolithic!)

Complaints are sometimes made by particular segments of the public and by professional groups that institutional accreditation does not act so as to protect their particular interests and values. This kind of criticism sometimes comes from professionals within higher education, often persons who identify not with institutions but with their fellow practitioners on campuses and off--nurses, engineers, teachers, chemists, historians, etc. A chemistry professor may see himself first as a part of an association of chemists who happen to be located in various institutions across the land. He may not see institution-wide accreditation as sufficiently protecting his interests because it appears to be institution directed and insufficiently accountable to him and his peers in chemistry. Included with such critics might be persons from prestigious doctoral programs within universities who view with alarm the growth--proliferation is the word--of competing doctoral programs in "inferior" institutions. They cannot see that institutional accreditation has adequately protected the public--and themselves. They observe that Gresham's law works with education as with money--the bad drives out the good.

Included, also, as critics are some persons from faculty associations concerned with faculty governance. In the never-ending tug-of-war between faculty and institutional administrators, our kind of accreditation is seen as insufficiently attentive to curbing arbitrary administration and to vesting power in faculty, where it allegedly belongs. Our association appears to be loaded with administrators. It is overlooked that evaluation teams are sharp to spot arbitrary administration and that these teams are generally staffed by faculty selected for their competence in the academic disciplines and for their judgment as evaluators.

In recent years during which a number of groups have identified themselves as discriminated against, we hear complaints from minority and underprivileged groups, including students. Why not students on evaluation teams? Are ethnic groups properly represented? What about women?

The burden that accreditation places upon institutions is another source of complaint. Large institutions are often distressed with

the number of accreditations they are subjected to. As one accreditation group troupes out the back door, the institution gets no breather because another comes in the front door. The National Commission on Accrediting was supposed to curb the number of professional organizations getting into accrediting, but fully succeeding at this task has been impossible. Professional groups from nurses to music teachers want to protect the public--and themselves. The association has much experience and works well with many specialized accrediting bodies. If an institution believes it needs the approval of these groups, that is its own business. It might be noted, however, that institution-wide accreditation and specialized accreditation are different things and that proliferation of specialized accreditation tends to discredit accreditation as such--including institutional accreditation. The institution which feels hounded by continuous visits of accrediting bodies and which sees certain kinds of specialized accreditation as increasing costs in one area at the expense of others may say, "A plague on all accreditation."

Complaints from government officials often originate from non-governmental sources. In our age of "going right to the top" the federal government may receive a complaint from parents about a matter like an institution not refunding a fee. Profit-making, non-tax-supported institutions may complain to the government about not being eligible for membership and consequently being subjected to unfair competition. Particularly since the Johnson administration, the federal government has been deeply involved in higher education and has had to rely upon independent accrediting associations as one means of assuring institutional accountability. The problems of the federal government are aggravated by the diversity in the several regional associations.

The states license all educational institutions within their boundaries, and through legislatures and boards they hold public institutions as accountable as they choose to make them. But licensure is not accreditation, and the states look to the regional associations to certify educational accountability through accreditation. Institutional accreditation is sometimes seen by state officials as a deterrent to saving money through reduction of educational costs. Given the fallibility of human nature, one should not be surprised if accreditation were sometimes used to perpetuate some questionable cost. "Why can't you do this?" asks the cost-conscious official. "The accrediting association won't allow it," is the president's reply. It could be that in most such cases the accrediting association is restraining something which would be seriously detrimental to education, but I would not dare assert that it is so in every case.

Our kind of accreditation takes some beating through blame for being an obstacle to what is called "pay-check" education. We are all familiar with the following pattern. The public establishes a vocationally oriented institution intended to teach practical things which will enable students to secure jobs and fulfill manpower needs of our

industrial society. With high but possibly false hope, the institution gets underway. But in a few years growing numbers of faculty and students are involved in the college transfer programs, and liberal arts programs have crowded in and increased the costs. This was precisely what the support public thought it was getting away from when it founded a vocational institution. An observing person who has been a part of or close to the forces at work in such a situation knows how complex the forces are and how over simple the expectations were. Employability is not that easily achieved. Students, as well as faculty, shape an institution to their needs, and these needs are not simple or one dimensional. One hears the questions: "Who forced all those costly courses in music and literature into the offering?" and "What's the sense of those students putting on plays?" Accreditation may be blamed or may be used as a defense.

Currently a public looking for a way to cut costs is showing an interest in three-year degrees. Seemingly these degrees would reduce the expense of higher education by 25% in operating costs and also relieve the pressure for new buildings. Some persons will expect quick changes willed from the top to bring three-year degrees into being. If they don't get them, accreditation may become a scapegoat.

Listening to critics sometimes, I get the following picture. Accreditation preserves a kind of education which the public doesn't want. Drastic changes are needed--changes in the kinds of education offered; changes in the period needed to earn degrees; and changes in the learning experience like credit by examination, self pacing, credit for work experience, independent study, and altered admissions policies. But, it is said, accreditation protects the old ways; and behind the protective shield sleepy, don't-rock-the-boat administrators and selfish Greek, Latin, and philosophy professors protect their vested interests through arbitrary course requirements for degrees while the manpower needs of society and the needs of youth for relevant or useful education go begging.

Listening to such criticism, one recognizes vast educational questions not settled: questions about the validity of liberal arts study, about whether vocational education really is vocational, and about education of the young as "resources" to fill manpower needs versus education as "personal fulfillment" and "self discovery." Is philosophy really useless? How about a string quartet? Should universities and colleges have required health courses because good health is so useful? Can patriotism, respect for parents, and sexual responsibility be taught in classes directly structured for the purpose? Many an old educational formula isn't working anymore. Higher education is trying to restructure itself without knowing well enough what it should be. Goals are not clear. These difficulties and questions involve much more than the accreditation process.

The standards of this association do not require institutions to be the same and at no time does the association tell an institution what

its goals must be. The association simply asks if an institution has soundly conceived goals appropriate for an institution of higher learning. It asks if the institution has the resources to do what it says it wishes to do and if it is in fact doing it. The association is not concerned if an institution does or does not offer courses in Latin or in automobile parts supply or whether it does or does not make provision for independent study. But if it does do these things, the association asks if they are done adequately. This association includes institutions as diverse as the Museum Art School in Portland and the Utah Technical College in Salt Lake City--each respectable in its own terms. It cannot be said that the association has homogenized institutions into a sterile sameness.

Granted, the association is not absolutely inclusive. It could not be and still offer satisfactory services to all its members. But it is remarkably inclusive now and it has the capacity to alter itself further with changing conditions. To belong at present, an institution must have a charter and formal authority to function from an appropriate governing agency, and it must be nonprofit. It must offer at least two years of higher education, and it must have adequate financial support to achieve its own objectives. Its principal programs must rest on a base of liberal studies required of all or most students. Liberal studies are those studies which stress fundamental knowledge; the nature of our membership will attest to the fact that no narrow interpretation has been given to the term "liberal studies." It is true that an institution offering only a craft would not be eligible for membership. For example, an art school teaching only the manipulation of media in a studio setting or a school confined to teaching people how to operate heavy equipment probably would not be eligible. It certainly does not mean that studio art or the operation of heavy equipment are downgraded as subjects to be taught by member institutions.

Then are there no valid criticisms? Are we doing our full duty in accrediting higher institutions so as to promote accountability? No functioning agency is without need for improvement. The Commission on Higher Schools of this association has its standards and procedures under constant study, and I do not recall a meeting in which some change has not been considered--usually adopted--to improve commission functions. The commission completely redrafted its Manual of Standards and Guide for Self Study in 1965 and revised it again in 1966, 1968, and 1970. The commission listens to its critics and responds.

Certain matters pertaining to the federal government which have come to focus in recent years, however, cannot be treated by a single regional association. Some persons who complain about accreditation to the federal government may not see the problems of accreditation clearly and may visualize solutions which are exceedingly unpromising, such as a congressionally-chartered public agency to control and

coordinate accreditation. But legitimate complaints need to be met. Within reason, shouldn't accreditation mean something near the same thing in all six regional associations, since the federal government relies upon these associations to certify who is eligible for various kinds of funds? Couldn't we use common terminology? Couldn't the standards applied in the various regional associations be brought even further into line with one another?

A limitation to our present system is that no single regional association can speak for regional associations to the federal government, and in these days we need a federation through which we can speak. We need a forum by which to communicate with other associations to unify our terminology and develop common standards. In concert with other associations we can act intelligently and unitedly in matters having to do with non-traditional studies, technical-vocational schools, and proprietory schools. The principle of voluntary accreditation of institutions on institution-wide basis depends upon our being open and adaptable and upon our being sensitive to forces which go beyond the boundaries of any single regional association. Certain studies of the problems of accreditation need to be made on a national basis.

For these reasons the Commission on Higher Schools of this association has moved with its counterparts in the five other regional associations to strengthen the coordinating agency called FRACHE (Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education). The strengthened FRACHE will promote common terminology, standards, and procedures among the associations to the end of achieving necessary consistency in principles and policies. It will provide for public representation, thus meeting the criticism of accreditation as exclusive of any but those inside the educational establishment. It will cooperate with and influence other accrediting agencies in ways that a single association cannot do working by itself. Problems having to do with institutional accreditation which a regional association cannot treat working alone will be taken up by the strengthened FRACHE.

While we alter FRACHE to do these things we should also be attentive to preserve two very fundamental values which are ours as a regional association. The first of these values has to do with certain assets which pertain to this particular region. (Other regions, of course, have their unique characteristics to be preserved.) The other is the valuable association of the secondary and higher schools which this organization fosters. This association promotes the concept of education as a continuous process, not education as two unrelated things, one in high school and one in college. Through this association we find ways of nurturing wide understanding among secondary and higher schools so that each re-enforces the other. The differences among two-year institutions, colleges, universities, high schools, private schools, public schools, highly specialized schools, and broadly based schools are understood and respected here. Within the Northwest

Association the Commission on Higher Schools and the Commission on Secondary Schools have all needed independence from each other, and they have the notable advantage of being together in the same association. I don't know any responsible person who wishes to lose any values of the association because one of our commissions identifies with a national agency called FRACHE and the other identifies with another such agency called CORSSAC (Council of Regional Secondary School Accrediting Commissions). We would be foolishly inattentive to our own values if we strengthened our relationships to FRACHE and CORSSAC and weakened our association.